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Crime fiction and mediatized religion

Towards a theory of post-secular crime fiction

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Crime fiction has generally been associated with empirical investigation and rational analysis. The genre is often historically linked to modern society, secular mind-frames and natural and realistic explanations of events. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a link to gothic tales as well as divine and supernatural appearances in crime fiction. In addition, contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction is showing a significant interest in aspects of human existence reaching beyond empirical and rational realism. Recent genre developments build a bridge into questions about spirituality.

What I intend to do here is, firstly, to run through four relatively popular examples of Scandinavian crime fiction to show how this genre trend works. Secondly, I wish to connect this with what has been dubbed *mediatized religion*, and, lastly, I will give a more general, philosophical explanation of why we see this development. Methodologically, as it may appear, I wish to give a cultural explanation of a growing tendency in recent Scandinavian crime fiction.

Crime fiction reproving God

There are various ways that religion may appear in crime fiction. The two extremes are a subversive critique of religion and an affirmative apologetic religious discourse. This generally means that crime fiction may claim to do away with religion which is basically in line with its link to modernity. On the other hand crime fiction does as well attempt to ratify the appearance of God which is a rather unusual expansion of the genre.

Though, as we shall see, many narratives of crime and religion are not particularly attracted to neither harsh criticism nor sermonizing divinity – several narratives are placed somewhere in the middle whereby modern rationality is in dialogue with spiritual reflections. My four examples, then, represent various media – i.e. one radio drama, one tv-series and two literary examples – while they also show different modes towards the divine from subversive criticism to affirmative divinity.

Daft religious idiots

My first example is a radio drama by the Danish dramatist Thomas Lagerman Lundme. His *Women Reproving God* [*Kvinder der irettesætter Gud*] (2009) is a story about the police officer Thomas who investigates the murder of a young woman. The investigation uncovers a Christian female sect that, as the drama phrases it, “tries to liberate women from men”. Two women have escaped the sect – one of them is a journalist who is trying to prove the fundamentalist intentions of the sect that justifies its actions through the approval of God. This means that the journalist becomes – as the title mentions – a woman who reproves God.

Thomas, the investigator, is in line with her position and, endingly, he claims that the sect consists of “daft religious idiots enchanting the truth”. In an article Carole M. Cusack explains religion in crime fiction as “pictured as ‘Other’ to mainstream society [where] the authors do not seek to understand these communities, but use them as a challenge to the norms of society”. Lundmes sect in *Women Reproving God* is by all means ‘Other’ to mainstream Danish society. This is, then, a good example of subversive critique of religion.

Abraham came along

My next example – the Danish TV-series *The Protectors* [*Livvagterne*] – is somewhat more complex. Several episodes of the series deal with extremism and terror that is either experienced or prohibited by the Danish intelligence service. At first this means that the series is very affirmative towards the increased authority of the police, which should make you think that the series places the criminal parties in the subversive role. Though this is the case dealing with very hard extremism this does not describe the overall theme of the series.

The three main characters represent three different monotheistic religions. One is Muslim, one is Jewish, and one is Christian. But the series not only represent three major world faiths – it also attempts reconciliation between the three (though Judaism is rather inadequately represented compared to the other two). The religious cease-fire is underlined by the fact that one of the agents moves into a closed Christian Free Church where he uncovers an old mosaic of father Abraham. Abraham is a grounding figure in all three religions that are, as you may know, also called *Abrahamic religions*.

This model of atonement throughout the series is again touched upon close to the ending of the second and last season. Here, the job of the agents is to protect a Catholic nun who goes by the name of Sister Abraham. This character is inspired by an actual Danish nun who preaches atonement between the Abrahamic religions, which goes for the character as well.

At some point in the series the three agents actually end up staying in the Free Church together which symbolically implies the idiom that the religions can

actually stay *under the same roof*. Investigating a possible terror attack in Denmark, the Christian agent shows the mosaic to a Muslim woman and says: “Abraham came along”. This expression bears a double meaning: Abraham both came with the house and with all three faiths. They all have the same point of origin.

These were my radio- and TV-examples. Now, I delve into two literary examples before turning to my socio-philosophical explanations. The first is the novel series about the investigator Barbarotti by the Swedish author Håkan Nesser. The last example is the novel *The Last Good Man* [*Den sidste gode mand*] by the Danish author pseudonym A.J. Kazinski.

God is up by 20 points

Nessers series consists of four books so far, running from *Man Without Dog* [*Människa utan hund*] (2006) until the very recent *The Lonely* [*De ensamma*] (201). Barbarotti is a complex detective character with a firm belief in rational and empirical investigative methods, but on the side he trying to prove or disprove the existence of God. He employs a complicated point system where he asks God for help in personal matters. If he helps him out God gets a certain amount of points, but if God is unable to help he subtracts points from the system.

When we meet Barbarotti God is ahead by an insignificant amount of points, but throughout the novels God gets ahead. In the fourth novel *The Lonely* God is up by 20 points. Barbarotti has promised himself that he would not ask God for help in his investigations, but in the second novel – a particularly complicated case – he ends up asking God for help. And gets it! In the fourth novel Barbarotti is confronted by severe personal problems and while his wife may be dying he actually talks to God. This ends his point system and, by now, signifies that Barbarotti has proven the existence of God for *himself*.

That this is personal proof is important in this relation. Barbarotti is not member of a specific religious community. He never goes to church, but he still shows openness towards a spiritual mode of living. In the midst of investigation in *The Lonely* Barbarotti meets a lapsed preacher who has left the Swedish folk church in order to save his faith. This guy talks about a God that does not live in churches, who is not contacted from the pulpit, but anyhow God is present in his life. By underlining his deinstitutionalized faith, our investigator Barbarotti recognizes this mode of faith as well. He chooses an individualistic spirituality.

A natural explanation

My second literary example is A.J. Kazinski’s novel *The Last Good Man*. Here, a Danish investigator and a Danish physicist are caught up in a mystery about a larger number of peculiar deaths around the world where there seems to be no clues at all. At least not until they stumble across the Jewish myth describing that there will always be 36 good men on Earth, though if they disappear we

would reach the Apocalypse. When we enter the story there are, as it appears, only two good men left – and one, an Italian policeman, dies shortly after. Various clues, then, seem to point towards our own investigator who then turns out to be no other than *the last good man* – and the guy doing all the killing seems to be a mysterious metaphysical being, maybe God himself.

By the end of the novel the empirically minded couple – underlined by the fact that one is a physicist – sees their ordinary world picture crumble in favor of a spiritual explanation of existence. This is basically a reversion of the normal narrative development of crime fiction where the supernatural may appear but only in transition until a natural explanation has been found. In *The Last Good Man* that natural explanation is in transition until a supernatural explanation has been found. The physicist actually ends up having a near death experience. She then becomes a spokesman for a negotiated version of science and spirituality: “the opposition between religion and science”, she says, “is powerfully hyped”. The investigator later states: “I’m not particularly religious. For me there is a natural explanation for this”. The physicist then says: “Yes. We have found a natural explanation. We just don’t understand it yet. This is the way all new discoveries begin”. The supernatural account, in this way, ends up being the natural explanation of the novel.

This ends my analytical illustrations of my paper. These examples were, though, but a pivotal excerpt of a much larger corpus of texts. You will find this tendency reflected in quite a few titles. In various ways authors reflect this cultural interest in religion and spirituality – these are authors such as Arne Dahl, Gunnar Staalesen, Henning Mortensen, Tom Egeland, Johan Theorin, Camilla Läckberg, Åsa Sigurðardóttir, Svend Åge Madsen, Axel Bolvig. They are respectively very different in how they deal with these themes, but collectively they underline a conspicuous interest in modern spirituality.

Mediatization and religion

One way of dealing with this is through what has been called *mediatized religion*. Research of a various kind shows that media play a very important role in shaping the way we think. This is characterized through the concept of mediatization. Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2005), sociologists of religion, talk about a flourishing interest in new religiosity on the Internet. Christopher Partridge (2008) deals with what he calls the *occultural* significance of information technology.

Stig Hjarvard (2008), in a book about mediatization, calls this development a *re-enchantment of the media*. Hjarvard is particularly interesting for me since he deals with *both* media and religion *and* popular genre fiction. Firstly, his research shows a massive increase of dealings with religion and the supernatural in the media throughout the past decade. Secondly, he has interviewed a number of people about their choice of genre if they were to read about “magic, spiritual or religious subjects”. Surprisingly, almost 28% would choose crime

fiction or thrillers, which shows that the assumed connection between modernity and crime fiction is not upheld by the readers themselves.

Generally, this increased focus on religion and spirituality in Scandinavian media seems to rub off on popular genre fiction. Genres dealing with the supernatural – such as horror or fantasy – are exceptionally popular at the moment, while crime fiction seems to open up. The irrational, the supernatural, the divine seems to attract more and more attention in crime fiction – the genre appears to re-open otherwise shut doors between rationality and supernaturality.

Rephrasing modernity

One much more general reason for this cultural and generic development may be what has been called *self-constrained* or *post-secular modernity*. The Danish philosopher Hans-Jørgen Schanz (2008) deals with the relationship between modernity and religion, and in his view modernity and modern thinking has come to realize that it seems unable to answer all questions, questions for instance about grief, happiness, death, existence, good and evil. And because modern thinking has realized its inability to provide sufficient solutions to these difficult questions, modernity becomes self-constrained. Being self-constrained modernity, then re-opens its door into religion. Though, it is, nevertheless, still religion in an appropriate reflexive distance.

This means that if crime fiction is, at first, connected to modernity, and modernity, secondly, becomes self-constrained, the genre must as well open up towards religion and spirituality. But as we have seen in my examples from Scandinavian crime fiction, the genre does not alone apply an apologetic and dogmatic religiosity – it often places itself somewhere in the middle of a parameter between subversive critique and affirmative spirituality.

This renewed interest in spirituality combined with reflexive criticism has been called *post-secularism* (Sigurdson, 2009). A post-secular society is a society that blends an awareness of questions of spirituality with an inclination towards reflexive critique. Post-secularism has, as well, come to realize that religion has far from been removed from the public sphere, but show an interest in reflexive spirituality rather than dogmatic and institutionalized religion. In many ways, this mode of spirituality is reflected in an obvious and precise way in particularly Nesser's novels about Barbarotti's negotiations with God: God is not just a customary fact – spirituality is there to be discussed.

With these analyses and this socio-philosophical background it seems suitable to discuss this genre development as *post-secular crime fiction*. Post-secular crime fiction is crime fiction that on the one hand deals with rational and empirical investigative methods, but combines this with a renewed interest in questions of the spirit and modern religion.

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